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DONALD RICHIE AND JOSEPH L. ANDERSON

Traditional Theater and the Film in Japan

The influence of the Kabuki, Noh, and other forms on film content and style

Well, to be brief, there isn't any. All of the parallels, drawn in Japan as carelessly as elsewhere, are forced; all the pigeonholes are wrongly labeled; all the conclusions, so carefully jumped at, are as false as the assumptions upon which they are based.

As an opening wedge let us take the celebrated example of *Rashomon*. One read all sorts of learned nonsense about the influence of Kabuki, and even the Noh. Akira Kurosawa, the director, read it too and eventually made the statement: "I haven't read one review from abroad that hasn't read false meanings. . . ." If pressed, he will then tell the story behind the acting style of *Rashomon*.

One night, in Kyoto just before shooting started, Kurosawa and his staff looked at a print of a Martin and Johnson jungle picture. They were all much impressed by the animals, particularly with a sequence of a lion on the prowl. Kurosawa said: "Well, Mifune, that's Tojamaru. Make the human like an animal." Thus Toshiro Mifune made his role of the bandit Tojamaru as lion-like as possible.

A bit later, the head of the studio saw a movie in downtown Kyoto in which a black panther appeared. At his urging everyone went to see it. This is how they came across the model for Machiko Kyo's character in the same film. Kurosawa will at this point observe that, if he is not mistaken, the performances of animals in jungle pictures are

somewhat removed from the Kabuki technique.

The truth is that the traditional theater in Japan has given almost nothing to the films. One would think that in a country with one of the most developed theatrical traditions in the world, influences and adaptations would be a natural and common occurrence. This, however, is simply not so. There are, of course, exceptions to this rule. Before going into precisely what these exceptions have been, however, it might be well to define the different categories of Japanese theater.

Among the better-known forms are the Noh and the Kabuki and the Bunraku—the Osaka doll-drama. Less familiar are the Shimpa and the Shingeki. The former is a dramatic form designed to express the enlightened emotions of the Meiji era. The latter is the "modern theater" of Japan, originally much influenced by Ibsen, Chekov, and Shaw, and now much given to polemic.

What remains are the various kinds of *yose* or vaudeville. This includes several forms of story-telling, among them the *kodan* and the *naniwabushi*. The former is comprised of individual stories, always historical, invariably complicated in plot, and endless in number. Since both *kodan* and Kabuki share a similar historical background, they very often share similar material. And it is from the story-telling art of the *kodan* that the Japanese film takes much of its ma-



terial. Hence the initial confusion. What is assumed to be a filmed Kabuki is often a *kodan* story on film.

All of the *kodan* material is so well-known, constituting what is in effect a kind of folklore, that the Japanese audience comes to the theater with the basic story memorized. This prior knowledge is assumed by the film-maker and there is no attempt to provide full exposition. These filmed *kodan* usually concern themselves with underdeveloped phases of a well-known character's life. The picture usually becomes a series of such tidbits; the better-known connecting sections are left out and anyone not familiar with the character is completely baffled.

The favorite stories are, naturally, those most often filmed. They usually center around a favorite feudal hero: Mataemon Araki, Chuji Kunisada, the Soga brothers, or Musashi Miyamoto. This latter hero even got himself exported to America where he won himself an Academy Award in the film called *Samurai*.

The movie, called *Miyamoto Musashi* in Japan, was the remake of a remake and,

NARAYAMA BUSHIKO: *The son (Teishi Takahashi) carries his mother (Kinuyo Tanaka) to the top of Mount Nara—there to leave her to die of starvation and exposure.*

moreover, was merely the first part of a new version of the familiar *kodan* story—in this case based upon an even further popularization by Eiji Yoshikawa, the Kenneth Roberts of Japan. Its receiving an Academy Award surprised everyone because, strictly speaking, the film wasn't finished yet. In a way it was like giving an award to the first chapter of a Pecos Bill serial.

In it, Director Hiroshi Inagaki assumed that his audience would already know all about Musashi and did not feel at all constrained to fill in on anything that happened in between the portions shown. Foreign critics found much to praise in what they thought was "the director's devotion to the essence of a situation, unmindful of the superfluous exigencies of plot" and Inagaki was very surprised.



RASHOMON: An unused publicity still satirizing the attitudes of the usual period-film. Toshiro Mifune hams it up with the sword while Machiki Kyo screams by his side.

Such then is the usual *kodan* hero when he gets in the movies. There may be new interpretations and new minor characters but the story is assumed to be always the same. These *kodan* tales are the backbone of the period-film and are all hardly perennials. It is a rare year that doesn't yield its harvest of new versions, differing from the old versions only in that widescreen or color or different actors are used. There is no question of borrowing techniques from the traditional theater since the traditional theater is not involved.

One of the hardiest of all the perennials, however, just happens to be a Kabuki. This is the famous *Chushingura* (The Loyal Forty-seven Ronin), new film versions of which are made about twice every year. Here, one thinks at last, is Kabuki influence.

There is, to be sure, a certain amount. The story is taken directly from the Kabuki, yet anyone seeing any one of these film versions—and there must be near half a hundred of them by now—is not likely to confuse it with the traditional theater.

The reason is that, like the filmed *kodan*, they are all rigidly realistic, which the Kabuki as a theatrical form is not. One may be reminded of Errol Flynn's *Robin Hood*, or Robert Taylor's *Ivanhoe*; one is not re-

minded of the theatrical style known as Kabuki.

Even when well-known Kabuki actors appear (and *Chushingura* is the only Kabuki play favored by the films) they usually modulate their performances until they are just as matter-of-fact, just as like-you-and-me as everyone else. They may, however, include a bit of Kabuki business—for after all, their only reason for inclusion is that they are famous Kabuki actors and are intended to raise the tone of the production.

There is, for example, a celebrated Kabuki stance known as the *mie*. It is used to indicate moments of great emotional stress and consists of an attitude during which the eyes are crossed and the tongue is partially stuck out. In a 1956 version of *Chushingura*, the featured Kabuki actor indulged in a very modified *mie* during the letter scene. In the realistic context of the film, the foreign observer might well wonder what had happened, why had the man become cross-eyed, why was he sticking out his tongue in that odd way? The Japanese observer would recognize it as a fugitive glimpse of Kabuki technique, inserted to let you know that the actor was the real thing, and would disregard it.

And this is about all the Kabuki influence

there is on the Japanese screen. It gives a few plays to the films and shows itself in small and rather self-conscious ways. There are many reasons for this. One of them is that the content of the Kabuki drama is very slight. Everything depends upon the actors' performances. It is, in fact, an actors' theater. The audience already knows the story. It goes merely to see so-and-so in such-and-such.

Another reason is that the Kabuki style of acting is simply too big for the film. It incorporates and depends upon dancing and singing, neither of which are appropriate to the realism which the Japanese film has from the first insisted upon. Since the *kodan*, a story-telling art, has no theatrical style, the Japanese period-films have always contented themselves with an absence of style. Films about Musashi Miyamoto and Chuji Kunisada are therefore as much influenced by the Japanese traditional theater as are American films about Billy the Kid and Jesse James.

That acting in Japanese period-films seems very grand and expansive to foreign audiences is due more to the blustering way of the samurai and the truly native Japanese inability to hold back emotion than to any influence from the traditional stage.

If the Kabuki has any influence at all, if the period-film has any historical precedent in the traditional theater, it is in the Kabuki *aragoto*, the rough-house plays generally about famous swordsmen. This Kabuki genre is full of action, elaborate posturing and stylized swordplay—the kind of Kabuki that the Japanese love to show foreigners.

Some critics, however, think that even this link between Kabuki and film is suspect. The film critic Tsuneo Hazumi says: "Unfortunately, there has never been any real con-

nection between Kabuki and films. . . . The Kyugeki [the earliest word for period-film], a poor substitute for genuine Kabuki, was given by rural troupes which had no connection with the great Kabuki tradition, and none of its art. The film star, Matsunosuke, was essentially an imitator of Kabuki rather than a performer of it." And even Matsunosuke—Japan's first full-fledged star—though his films were little more than photographed theatrical tableaux, was in full revolt against the traditional theater.

Thus, while Kabuki and the *kodan*-based period-film sometimes share similar material and often share similar themes (since both were brought to their present form entirely in the feudal Tokugawa eras) they share little else. This, one might observe, does not at all disturb the Japanese filmgoer. Fully ninety percent of the people in Japan have never seen the Kabuki. They know it exists, they have heard about it, they vaguely approve of it, but they don't understand it and they aren't curious about it. Along with the Noh and the Bunraku it is a part of the cultural heritage. It is taken for granted—that is, it is ignored. One even hears Noh defined as simply something that foreigners see when they come to Japan.

There have, however, been isolated experiments in adapting Kabuki to the screen. At least three of them have been highly successful films artistically and deserve the attention of the West.

The first of these was Kurosawa's *Tora no O o Fumu Otokotachi* (The Men Who Tread on the Tail of the Tiger) which was a film version of the Kabuki play *Kanjinchō*. It was finished just before the end of the war in 1945 but not released until 1953. The reason for the delay was that the Occupation was using both the Kabuki and the period-film as whipping boys—in the meantime in-

stituting such "healthy and democratic" genres as the brutal gang-film. Thus, though the Kurosawa film is in essence antifeudal, it was banned.

The picture followed the Kabuki plot rather closely, though the style of the film was realistic, and inserted a subplot in which the comedian Ennoken became the embodiment of the common man. The comic irony of the film lay in the plot parallels between the inflated and sententious sentimentality of the Kabuki heroes and the sly burlesque of the comedian. The director's aim—as in most of his films—was to show the equality of all human emotions despite artificial class or social barriers, and he succeeded brilliantly.

Another successful experiment was Kimisaburo Yoshimura's *Bijo to Kairyu* (The Beauty and the Dragon), a 1955 film based on one of the eighteen chief Kabuki plays. Yoshimura had already richly satirized the period-film hero in *Mori no Ishimatsu* (Ishimatsu of the Forest) in which he maintained that the famous and blustering Ishimatsu owed his reputation mostly to good public relations. Now he used Kabuki as a vehicle for satirizing contemporary Japanese society. Japan is shown suffering a terrible drought; the priest who controls a dragon who controls the rain is so convinced of his own virtue that he is unapproachable. Finally a princess decides that the only way to save the country is to tempt the priest until he falls from virtue. This, she reasons, will release the dragon.

The film was made as a spirited attack on contemporary self-righteousness and bigotry: by inference the priests were the modern politicians and intellectuals. The princess, though very period-film-correct, really had the mind of a modern postwar girl. Like all good Japanese period-films it was

an experiment, an exception to the general rule.

Technically the film was very interesting. Somewhat like *Henry V*, it began with a reconstruction of a performance of the play, an accurately created historical performance in the proper classical style, and then moved on, as a film, into a more cinematic interpretation. It was highly praised by the Kabuki authorities, not because it was a literal reproduction but because it was a freely adapted modern version made completely in the spirit of the original.

The third, and perhaps the most successful experiment is Keisuke Kinoshita's 1958 film *Narayama Bushiko* (The Song of Narayama), based on Shichiro Fukazawa's prize-winning short story of a mountain community, so short of food that they traditionally thin out the population by exposing the village elders to the elements on the top of Mount Nara. This story had been extremely successful in a Kabuki version in the summer of 1957, and although Kinoshita took his adaptation directly from the original, he deliberately chose a theatrical manner of presentation in order to heighten the dramatic effect.

The film opened in the manner of a Kabuki with one of the masked assistants banging the wooden *hyoshige* which heralds the beginning of the play, and then the running-curtain was drawn to expose the first scene of the film. Throughout, the Kabuki *nagauta* was used, that vocal samisen accompaniment which describes and comments upon the action. The samisen not only provided the background music, it was also used for sound effects. At one point it was heard instead of the natural noises of a storm; at another, it was the sound of snow falling. At yet another point it was used to create the sound of the aged heroine as she pur-

posely breaks her teeth so that she will look more presentably old.

The visuals in the film were handled with an effortless virtuosity. Divisions between scenes, for example, often consisted of sudden light changes at which whole sections of the scenery slid away; intimate conversations were accented by careful spotlighting; bushes and branches were parted to reveal a set piece behind; often the entire background would suddenly drop to reveal the new set, the new actors.

Yet, with all this stagecraft, Kinoshita remained constantly aware that he was making a film and hence there was nothing stagy about the finished picture. The moving camera was used to superlative effect, and color was most imaginatively designed: pistachio skies, blue snow, and sunsets which looked like forest fires. The pacing and general tempo of the film revealed the art of cinema at its most creative.

Shochiku 1956 version of CHUSHINGURA: the moment before the final raid in a typical period drama. The man in the middle is from the Kabuki and that is about all the Kabuki influence in the film.

Thus, all three directors—Kurosawa, Yoshimura, and Kinoshita—have pointed ways in which the Kabuki could actually enrich the film and make “Kabuki influence” more than an empty critical phrase. Still, however, no one follows their lead.

The other forms of traditional theater have, if possible, had even less influence on the Japanese film. The Bunraku shares its material with the Kabuki and, very occasionally, with the *kodan* and the *naniwa-bushi*. Both share the same repertoire, and occasionally films like Mizoguchi's *Chikamatsu Monogatari* (A Tale from Chikamatsu) use one of the plays. It is perhaps indicative of the self-consciousness of this use that Mizoguchi did not call his excellent film by its proper name, that is, the name of the play upon which it was based. It is a bit like calling *Othello*, in a film version, *A Tale from Shakespeare*.

The Shimpa has given even less. Originally it dealt with Meiji problems in Meiji settings and, with no vital creative impulse of its own, had to look elsewhere for its inspiration. After 1890, Shimpa playwrights relied more and more on popular novels or





KUMONOSU-JO: *The messenger brings the head of Duncan.*

sensational news items from the daily press. Originally the Japanese screen was cluttered with filmed Shimpa but nowadays, though the Shimpa attitude of sentimentality for its own sake has found a secure place for itself in the Japanese films, relatively few pictures use Shimpa stories. Of these, foreigners have seen at least one, the lachrymose *Konjiki Yasha* (The Golden Demon), based on a Shimpa version of a popular novel. Actually, at present the majority of Shimpa plays are based upon successful films.

Shingeki offers even less. Though it furnishes a few plays to the screen it is much more concerned with static discourse than visual action or even characterization. It is, in fact, an unhealthy little theater of pure polemic. Like the Shimpa it now adapts novels or gives foreign plays and is completely separate from the films.

Finally, one may at last think, there is the Noh. But, here again, no there isn't. There have been very, very few film adaptations of Noh plays and the Noh has had almost no influence on the film art of Japan. One of the reasons is that the form of the drama could not be further removed from the requirements of the film. A total adaptation would be necessary. Another is that only a relatively few Japanese have ever seen or care much about seeing the Noh. If one out of ten has seen the Kabuki, only about one out of a hundred has ever seen the Noh.

Despite all the nonsense about the influence of the Noh on the Japanese film (written, one might add, in Japan as well as abroad) the leading Noh critic, Michizo Toita, has rightly said: "One must look hard, almost invent influences if writing on this subject. . . . Movies in their early stages were often cheap imitations of Kabuki but although Noh is greater in its stage art, I know of no instance of its theories and techniques having been really utilized by film-makers."

If there is any Noh influence at all it tends to be oblique. In *Kumonosu-Jo* (The Castle of the Spider's Web), shown abroad as *Throne of Blood*, Kurosawa makes conscious use of elements of Noh. Scenes with the witch (this film version of *Macbeth* uses one instead of Shakespeare's three) were reconstructed from the director's recollections of a Noh he had once seen. The make-up of Isuzu Yamada—who played the role equivalent to Lady Macbeth, the background music, the movements, the general timing of the intimate scenes were all caught by Noh fans but by no one else. And all of these elements were consciously and experimentally included. Their appearance was most unusual.

One may perhaps understand better why the traditional Japanese theater, one of the richest theatrical traditions in the world, has given so little to the Japanese film by looking at the parallel reluctance to use Japanese music in films. (*Narayama Bushiko* is an exception.) It is used if it has a place in the plot: lonely girl finds solace in her *koto*; celebrated geisha shows off with her *samisen*; couple in love attend local festival. One of Japan's better-known composers, Yasushi Akutagawa, claims that he finds a positive reluctance on the part of many directors to accept film music in any way related to the Japanese traditional forms.

One of the reasons for this is that in Japan, Japanese traditional music is taken entirely for granted. There are at least a dozen nationally known magazines devoted to Western-style music in all of its various forms, but there is not one widely distributed publication of any repute devoted to Japanese traditional music.

Another reason is that, no matter how exotic the style and action of the period-film appears to foreign audiences, to the Japanese this film style is a part of the realist tradition, adopted from the West and therefore without connection to the classical Japanese drama. Because so much Japanese classical music exists only in relation to the classic drama, the use of this music in films must present a severe stylistic clash. The music is identified with classical acting but the acting on the screen is not classical.

Therefore many film producers in Japan find satisfying combinations which would chill most foreigners to the bone. In a 1934 version of *Chushingura*, the man who did the music used Schubert's "unfinished" symphony to back the climactic scene where the *ronin* attack their lord's enemy. This use

continues to be highly praised by certain critics for its "perfect union" of a Japanese dramatic classic with a Western musical classic.

A more famous example is the music for *Rashomon*, during which surprised foreigners found themselves listening to something depressingly like Ravel's *Boléro*. Some have said that the film was made primarily for export and that the music was composed accordingly. This is not so: *Rashomon* was a self-conscious experiment and was made over everyone's dead body, including Daiei's. The fact that it was sent into competition at all was only because the Japanese representative for Italiafilm happened to know a good film when she saw one.

Actually, *Rashomon*'s composer—the late Fumio Hayasaka—was one of Japan's most original composers, filled with an integrity rare in any country and rarer in Japan. He was ordered to write something like the *Boléro* because Kurosawa felt that it would be closer to the style of the film, a style which was never once intended to be "Japanese" in the period-film sense of the word. The critics—more astute than usual—agreed entirely, finding *Rashomon* to be "Kurosawa at his most Western."

This, then, is the real reason why the Japanese theater has had so little influence on the Japanese film. They are thought of as being entirely separate. The Noh, the Kabuki, are thought of as being entirely Japanese. And so they are, in a way. At least, those theatrical elements from other countries which originally helped inspire the Japanese forms have long ceased to exist. Movies, however, are only half a century old. The art of the film is still considered foreign to traditional Japanese theatrical art.